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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001135

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/IPA, NEA/RA, OES/IHA, OPS CENTER  
GENEVA FOR WHO REP

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BIRD FLU SPREADS IN ISRAEL

REF: TEL AVIV 1105

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Summary: Israeli agriculture officials confirmed H5N1 avian influenza at two chicken farms not far from turkey farms just outside Gaza where the outbreak of bird flu started last week. H5N1 will likely be confirmed at a third new location in the Negev. Birds from Moshav Kinneret in northern Israel are reportedly being tested, with results due shortly. Agriculture officials noted that a large chicken farm in Gaza is only 800 meters from the turkey farm where H5N1 was first discovered in Israel. Officials believe the disease may have been spread via cages used to deliver birds to a slaughter house used by all the affected farms. The Government is considering whether to increase compensation to poultry farmers. Resources are strained as the GOI works to prevent AI from spreading to additional areas. There has been a report of farmers refusing to cooperate with authorities. The head of the veterinary service met with Palestinian counterparts to facilitate testing of Palestinian poultry, but the Ministry of Health has not yet decided whether to provide protective gear to the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian veterinary officials have turned over carcasses of dead birds from the West Bank for testing in Israel. An Israeli NGO with good contacts in Gaza said that no/no cases of AI have been discovered there. End summary.

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H5N1 JUMPS FROM TURKEYS TO CHICKENS

2. (SBU) A Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) official told Embassy late on March 20 that MOA had confirmed H5N1 among chickens at Nir Oz and Amioz, near Ein Hashlosa and Hulit where H5N1 killed turkeys earlier. On March 21, an MOA contact said chickens had died and bird flu was suspected at Kibbutz Gat, several kilometers north of Sde Moshe where H5N1 has been confirmed. An MOA official noted that there is a large chicken farm in Gaza just 800 meters from where bird flu was first discovered at Ein Hashlosa.

3. (U) MOA officials have told Embassy that they do not know how H5N1 first arrived in Israel. They believe it spread quickly among farms using the same slaughter house, because the same cages are used to transport birds from all the affected farms and some cages apparently were not cleaned thoroughly between trips. Some farms in central Israel are located side by side and there is concern that AI could spread quickly if it jumps to those areas.

4. (U) The Israeli paper Haaretz reported March 21 that anonymous MOA sources speculated the disease entered Israel from Egypt by a person or persons who picked up the virus on their shoes, clothing or personal effects. The carrier may have then worked on one of the farms where the disease has been confirmed. Other possible carriers include visitors or tourists returning from Turkey or Bedouin smugglers crossing from Egypt. The pattern of spread of the disease made infection by migratory birds less likely, the sources said.

5. (SBU) Resources are strained as the GOI works to prevent AI from spreading to additional areas. An MOA official told Embassy that farm workers are staying away from affected farms, and the Ministry of Defense is providing 150 contract personnel to help with eliminating birds in the quarantined areas. Officials have set up roadblocks and are inspecting vehicles on major roads surrounding those areas. Side roads have been closed. Many poultry farms in central Israel are located side by side and interconnected, so there is concern that bird flu could spread more rapidly if it moved north from the Negev. According to an online Jerusalem Post report March 21, Moshav Kinneret in the north may have been infected, and birds from the moshav are being tested.

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GOI MULLING ADDITIONAL COMPENSATION

6. (SBU) Agriculture sector leaders have called on Acting Prime Minister Olmert to declare the outbreak a "natural disaster," which could result in compensation for indirect costs, loss of profits and rehabilitation. Farmers are required to clean and disinfect affected areas, and to leave them empty for a month. Some industry leaders have implied that farmers will refuse to cooperate with authorities unless they are given additional compensation. An Embassy contact reported March 21 that farmers at Amioz had refused to allow government workers to enter. At midday government officials were speaking with the farmers to get them to

cooperate. A shipment of poultry vaccine has reportedly arrived and is being deployed for possible use.

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POSSIBLE SHORTAGE OF KOSHER CHICKEN FOR PASSOVER  
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¶7. (SBU) Following requests from the MOA and a private distributor, Embassy FAS office is contacting U.S. vendors of kosher chicken products to fill a gap now estimated at 5,000 tons. The Government has thus far stated publicly that chicken and egg supplies will be adequate for the April holidays.

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MOA IN CONTACT WITH PALESTINIAN VETERINARY SERVICE  
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¶10. (SBU) The head of the Israeli Veterinary Service told Embassy/FAS March 21 that West Bank Palestinian veterinary officials had turned over carcasses of dead wild birds for Israeli counterparts to test for bird flu. An Israeli NGO with good contacts in Gaza told econoff March 21 that no/no cases of AI have been discovered there. The Israeli Ministry of Health is still deciding whether it can spare protective gear to share with Palestinian offices.